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SUBJECT: EMBASSY PRAGUE SPONSORS DISCUSSION ON EXTREMISM

11. (U) Summary: On June 24, the Embassy, in cooperation with the Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust, hosted a panel discussion on extremism in the Czech Republic attended by approximately 60 people. The debate featured the Ministers of Human Rights and Interior, the Human Rights Ombudsman, key opinion leaders, NGO representatives, Roma activists, and the media. The Ombudsman appealed to Czechs to be more active in demonstrating their clear stand against racism, neo-Nazism, and anti-Roma violence. The Human Rights Minister said that the planned strategy for eliminating the problem of social exclusion should be concluded by the end of the interim government of Prime Minister Jan Fischer. The Interior Minister stressed that "we should not be afraid to take tough steps against extremism, and we should help Roma in their quest for self-emancipation." End Summary.

Debate on Extremism in the Context of Roma Holocaust Exhibit

12. (U) On June 24, the Embassy, in cooperation with the Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust, hosted a round table discussion entitled "Confronting Extremism in the Czech Republic." The debate focused on ways to respond to extremism from different perspectives. The debate took place in conjunction with the opening of a unique photo exhibition at the American Center entitled "A Vanished World," which highlights the history and a way of life of the indigenous Roma and Sinti people in the Czech Lands, which was destroyed in the Romani Holocaust. Special attention in the exhibit is devoted to events in the Nazi concentration camp at Lety near Pisek, where most of the Roma prisoners perished. As Charge d'Affaires Mary Thompson-Jones remarked at the opening, "it is only fitting that the debaters gathered here to view this outstanding exhibition and discuss extremism in the Czech Republic, especially in light of the recent activities of extremist groups in the Czech Republic."

Panel Discussion on Extremism

13. (U) The panel discussion featured cabinet ministers and key opinion leaders, including Minister of Human Rights Michael Kocab, Minister of Interior Martin Pecina, Human Rights Ombudsman Otakar Motejl, sociologist Karel Cada of the Gabal Analysis and Consulting Agency, lawyer and human rights activist Klara Kalibova of Tolerance Foundation, Cenek Ruzicka, Director of the Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust, and Gabriela Hrabanova of the Government Council for Roma Community Affairs. Moderator Jan Urban, noted publicist and human rights activist, outlined three major areas of the debate: 1. Does extremism threaten the Czech constitutional and legal system? 2. Can the government respond to extremism successfully only by using repression? 3. What other methods can be used to respond to extremism--is the Czech Republic today able to confront this phenomenon? The debate brought together 55 opinion makers, political analysts, sociologists, NGO and Roma activists and the media.

Does Extremism Threaten the Czech Constitutional

System?

14. (U) Human Rights Minister Kocab stressed that a joint systemized approach in fighting extremism is needed. He mentioned the fact that the 20th century was tyrannized by two extremist systems--Nazism and Communism. He is convinced that "emerging extremism should be dealt with very carefully; prevention should play a key role." In this respect he said he wanted a planned strategy for fighting social exclusion to be concluded under the interim government of Prime Minister Jan Fischer, as opposed to the end of the year as was originally proposed. An inter-ministerial working group is preparing the material.

15. (U) Interior Minister Pecina thinks a major problem in Czech society is a lack of mutual adaptability of the majority population and Roma. He also mentioned political populism as an important cause of extremism. "We have politicians who have made it to high echelons of power due to their manifestation of racism." As an example he mentioned former Deputy Premier and current Senator Jiri Cunek, who is notorious for evicting Roma who were unable to pay their rents from their homes in Vsetin where he served as the mayor in 2006. "The situation is very serious, we must fight against political racists and racist parties," Pecina said. Kalibova noted that "we are facing a rise of verbal and physical violence against Roma." She warned against vulgarization of society by neo-Nazis.

Can the government respond to extremism successfully
only by using repression?

16. (U) Sociologists and political analyst have lately warned of rising activities of ultra-right extremists. According to Kalibova

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of Tolerance, who has long been monitoring the ultra-right movements, the current situation is the result of the fact that neo-Nazism has so far been analyzed as a sociological problem, and ways to prevent the rise of these movements were not sought. "We have been facing an enormous increase of verbal and physical violence. There are attempts at armed conflicts with the Roma community," she said. Pecina said the situation is "very serious." He also noted that combating extremism is one of the priorities of the current interim government and his ministry. "We must not give in to extremists. We must take tough steps against them," Pecina said. He also noted the necessary role of the church in solving this problem. The Interior Ministry has already formed a task force to address the extremist issue, he said. Kocab said extremism has been around for a while and there are many facets of the problem to be addressed. He said we must take concrete steps to fight the problem and that his ministry is motivated to go further. Hrabanova concurred that the problem is serious and getting worse. Cenek Ruzicka, Director of the Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust, said housing is one of the major problems and said the Romani "have no chances to get ahead." Motejl seemed to take the most comprehensive, level view of the problem. He cited Teplice and Chomutov as visible examples of extremism in the Czech Republic. He said that extremism is a political problem, a problem of the immigration system but also a serious problem of integration. While he said he is afraid of extremism he does not foresee a pogrom in the future. He, however, warned against positive discrimination, or actively favoring one category of people over others because they are considered to be disadvantaged. To Motejl, positive discrimination is "very dangerous." Motejl also mentioned that there is a potential for racism among the police and prison guards.

Is the Czech Republic Able to Face Extremism?
Public Attitudes Toward the Roma

17. (U) A significant theme of the debate was the relationship of the majority society to the Roma. Sociologist Karel Cada pointed to the latest polls saying that over 90 per cent of Czechs think that Romanies do not want to work and that they abuse the welfare system.

About 80 per cent agree with the view that Romanies are a different race that will never change or adapt itself, Cada said. Jan Hartl, Director of the STEM polling institute, said the polls had shown that Czech society was not racist, but deeply "anti-Gypsy." Sociologist Jirina Siklova concurred that "anti-Gypsy" sentiments is a problem of Czech society. According to Cenek Ruzicka, a large portion of society consider Roma an alien element. He agreed with some other debaters that people do not know much about Roma, and agreed with most other debaters that the media often does not report on positive developments and good examples. Ombudsman Motejl singled out the North Moravian region as the only one where something positive is being done for the Roma thanks to the 20-year effort of Indian human rights activist Kumar Vishwanathan. Hrabanova pointed to the European Parliament elections and how the gains by some of the extremist parties highlighted the growing seriousness of the problem. Kocab talked about intolerance that is based in ignorance. He said education of the general public will be an important part of the process to solve the extremism issue. Kalibova was more pessimistic, saying she was skeptical things have improved much over the last 30 years. She likened the situation in the Czech Republic to Yugoslavia and said that it was possible that a similar situation could happen here. She noted the ineffectiveness of the police to combat the problem, citing the lack of convictions following arrests. Pecina seems more focused on the future and did not want to lecture about the past. Let's keep what works and fix what is broken in the system was his message. He said that there is political will now to fix the problem, in contrast to before.

Conclusions

18. (U) Comment: The debate made clear that although Czech society has a potential to counter what one debater called "a third attempt at the Holocaust," Czechs need to be much more active in demonstrating their clear stand against extremist activities (Ombudsman Motejl). Yet, "we should not be afraid to take tough steps against extremists, and we should help Roma in their quest for self-emancipation" (Interior Minister Pecina). It remains to be seen whether the interim government, which has set as one of its priorities fighting extremism, will be able to fulfill its task in the remaining three months until the early elections in October.
End Comment.

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